



Tom Singer

Oral History Transcription

March 3, 2005 [Side B]

Interviewed by:	Kathy O'Dell and David Healey
Place of interview:	Office of Tom Singer
Date of interview:	March 3, 2005
Approximate length of interview:	13 minutes
Transcribed by:	Howard Dukes, staff, Civil Rights Heritage Center
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Summary:	<p>Tom Singer is a South Bend attorney who graduated from Central High School in 1953. He was a basketball player there. He then went on to earn a bachelor's degree and a law degree from the University of Michigan before returning to South Bend and being involved in civil rights and fair housing issues in the city.</p>

0:00:08 [David Healey]: ...Jess Dickinson being on many committees. Attorney Singer was talking about Jess Dickinson. So, I suppose you were off, pretty much out of the committee circuit in the '60s when Jess Dickinson was...

[Tom Singer]: After '65.

[DH]: He was heavily involved throughout his entire life and one of the premier Democrats here in the city. Did you maintain a relationship with the Democratic party throughout this time?

[TS]: Not after... not after the '60s. I was a precinct committeeman for a while, but no.

[DH]: You just left that behind.

[TS]: Yes.

[DH]: Alright. Well that pretty much answers all my questions.

0:01:09 [Kathy O'Dell]: Is there anything that you can think of that we might have glossed over or should have asked you, but...

[TS]: No, but you bring back memories that I hadn't visited for a long time. But I didn't keep... I didn't keep records of all of this stuff, which in hindsight I...

[KOD]: I know... regret. When you try to go back and compile some of that stuff... you hear stories of people going into... I don't know whose office it was and just throwing... Chester Allen's office, and just throwing away newspapers and artifacts.

[TS]: I know Tom Broden had a written history of the Biracial Committee, Human Relations Commission, and maybe included the Fair Housing Committee, and I saw the reports. So, it's some place out there.

[KOD]: At Notre Dame?

[TS]: I don't know what Tom did with it.

[DH]: Do we have a copy of that?

[KOD]: I don't know. It seems like there was some... in his interview there was a reference of something at the archives of his but I...at the archives, I didn't find much at Notre Dame as far as civil rights other than reference to Theodore Hesburgh and this national type thing.

[TS]: I don't know if it would have been out there, but it... but Tom put this together. I read it and made some suggestions and where it went from there I don't know.

0:02:49 [KOD]: Do you have any recollection as far as, at that period of time when you were active in civil rights, of any input from Notre Dame, or... I know... I don't think that was the impression from Mr. Broden that there was... as far as the University itself some individuals that were...

[TS]: No. I don't have any... I don't think there was any. I think that changed when Tom was Director of a center out there for urban policy or something like that. But in the early '60s, except for individuals—Tom Broden, Con Kellenburg was on the Fair Housing Committee—but, outside of that I don't...

0:03:42 [KOD]: Did you know Father Pyle. Dan Pyle?

[TS]: Oh yeah.

[KOD]: Did you have any work with him in any respects?

[TS]: Yes, he was involved in all of the stuff.

[KOD]: Right. That's what I heard.

[TS]: And very... just a very decent fellow.

[KOD]: At St. Augustine's Church.

[TS]: Yes. Yes.

0:04:03 [DH]: You worked with Rev. Bernard White Sr.?

[TS]: I knew him, but he was not doing much in the '60s that I... I didn't see him. I remember him because the church I went to as a kid had Human Relations Sunday, or something like that, and Bernard White would come there and preach. And our preacher would go to his church. It only happened once a year.

[KOD]: Which church did you go to?

[TS]: It was a First Christian Church. Downtown.

[DH]: Exchanged ministers. I never heard that.

[TS]: Right. Frank Davidson was our minister, and Bernie White was at whatever church he was, so on one Sunday a year they would change places and it became very apparent that... that's all it was because our congregation was all white...

[KOD]: So, it wasn't any other exchange of...

[TS]: No, we were all white and I assume theirs was black, and so it was kind of a hollow message that was being sent by this exchange, but at least...

0:05:13 [KOD]: Do you know what the reason was for that. Was it just... you said it was a... a hollow message.

[TS]: Well it was... in the sense that this isn't the way it is. I mean these are two segregated communities, and the exchange of a minister once a year doesn't change what's really there.

0:05:40 [KOD]: Besides, the people that you knew—the African American students on the basketball teams and so forth—did you have friends that you spent time with outside of school or other extra-curricular activities or... when you were growing up?

[TS]: Outside of school, and generally outside of athletics, there wasn't a lot of mingling. I knew Chester Allen from high school on, but there were no black people at Mussel or Colfax, and it wasn't until Central that we had any real contact.

0:06:29 [KOD]: So then, if that was the situation, how did everybody get along outside... I... I get the impression that the sports groups did fine since they were so successful. Everybody really rallied behind them. But, as far as the rest of the students, how did people get along? Was there any problem there? You were coming from kind of two different backgrounds...

[TS]: There was not a lot of social interacting. Sonny [Lloyd] Haynes, who was a graduate from Central, '52, and then went on to Hollywood and was on that television program Room... what?

[DH]: 222 wasn't it?

[TS]: Room 222. Well, he reported that he felt that he had been discriminated against at Central. We were in the same home room together, and so I'm sure there were a lot of things that happened that I would not be sensitive to that he was. Blacks were not involved in the dramatic programs at Central—and they one of the best programs in the country.

0:07:46 [KOD]: Now was that... I've heard that before too... with the exception of maybe one or two people they said... they said who were really fine singers or something like that. Was that intentional? I also... the cheerleading squad, but yet I did find a newspaper clipping that had two black... two black guys on the... part of the cheerleading squad. So, was that something that was intentional? Were people afraid to try out for it or...

[TS]: I don't know. I had not heard that it was intentional, but the choir groups, the band groups... there were some but not a lot. There were no black members of the Central High tumblers was... which is a gymnastic group. There were no blacks on the debate team...

[KOD]: And this would have been... you would have graduated in...

[TS]: '52.

[KOD]: '52. Ok.

0:08:43 [DH]: So, you were on the Central basketball team that won the championship... '54. You left just before they won.

[TS]: Right. The year before they won. They won in '53.

[DH]: '53.

[TS]: They got rid of me and they won. But they had on that team they had Paul Harvey and Horace Blanton and Billy... what other fella. I can't remember.¹

[DH]: So, our picture of the championship team will not have your picture in it.

¹ Mr. Singer may be referring to Bill Harmon who was a member of that team. See <http://michianamemory.sjcp1.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16827coll4/id/2690>.

[TS]: No. No.

[DH]: Missed it by one year.

[TS]: By one year.

[KOD]: It was part of the foundation.

[DH]: I interviewed Paul Harvey this past summer.

[TS]: Oh, did you.

[DH]: He's a retired South Bend black police officer.

[TS]: Sure.

[DH]: I've interviewed Spamward Mitchem and Paul Harvey and Darrell Perkins, and they all have some interesting stories about the South Bend police department in the 1950s and '60s.

[TS]: I'm sure.

0:09:49 [KOD]: Oh, along that same line, I just wanted to ask you real quick: If you went to outside activities like dances or anything like that, do you remember where you went? I don't know... now I don't know... I haven't been given a time frame as far as whether the Palais Royale was open then for dances. Was the crowd integrated? Can you give many any background?

[TS]: Well, there was a... dances... there was a junior prom at, I thought, the Indiana club. Our senior prom was at the Palais.

[KOD]: And I'm assuming since those were school sponsored everyone was there.

[TS]: Everyone who wanted to go.

0:10:34 [KOD]: But as far as someplace you wanted to go for dance other than like a school sponsored dance. If there was somewhere like where...

[TS]: If there was I didn't go.

I thought things were rather smooth at Central, but there wasn't a lot of social interaction between the races. In spite of what it may look like there was. There were no... there were no riots or anything, but I think black people who went through Central High School would have felt and reported that there were two different groups here and we just didn't get together. I'm they would say that...

[KOD]: Well, that's probably true because I graduated from Riley '67, and I lived out in Gilmore Park and I was really kind of naïve and oblivious to anything that was going on.

[TS]: Sure.

[KOD]: I really, after going back and studying all this stuff, I really feel I was out of the loop. I should have been more cognizant of things that were happening.

0:11:44 [DH]: One of the things that I listened to interviews of African Americans who went to Central was one of the primary... besides the problems you had mentioned—not [having] access to extra-curricular activities unless they were an excellent basketball player, an excellent football player, you didn't have much chance to do anything extra-curricular. But the main problem was that they were never counseled about continuing education, or given an opportunity to take courses that prepared them for education outside of Central. And probably looking back in your high school career you probably did have a counselor that sort of prompted you into certain classes to take to help you with your college education.

[TS]: I'm sure I did, but I don't remember that having any influence on me.

[DH]: So, your parents were the primary influence.

[TS]: Right. I knew I was going to law school by the time I was in the seventh grade, so in terms of motivation and what I needed...

[DH]: By the seventh grade you knew you were going to be a lawyer?

[TS]: Well, I knew I wanted to be a politician, and I knew I had to go to law school to be a politician so in terms of direction I had...

[DH]: You already knew where you were going.

[TS]: I knew.

0:13:04 [DH]: I've talked with people—African Americans who did go to college, and usually the common denominator there was church and family that prompted them to...

[TS]: Sure

[DH]: To go on. They didn't get any encouragement at Central.

[TS]: I think that's probably true. I think that's true.

[DH]: Well, that pretty much answers everything.

[TS]: Sorry, I haven't been more helpful.

[KOD]: I really appreciate you taking the time to share all of that information...

[Audio ends]